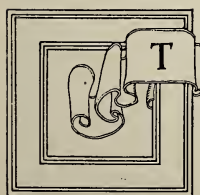




A MIDNIGHT CONFERENCE

AND OTHER PASSAGES FROM THE PAPERS OF SECRETARY
SALMON P. CHASE

By Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer



THE evil star which seemed somehow to hang above the heads of Salmon P. Chase and his daughter Kate, afterward Mrs. Sprague, to bring them so much disappointment, pursued the letters and diaries of the able statesman whom Lincoln made his Secretary of the Treasury in 1861 and then three years later appointed to be Chief Justice of the United States. At his death two biographers of Mr. Chase appeared. Judge Warden asserted his claim to prepare a volume, a task which he promptly performed in his own

way. Vain efforts were made by Mrs. Sprague to dispossess him of the papers, and the book profoundly displeased the family and Mr. Chase's friends. Almost simultaneously Mr. Schuckers, who had once been the statesman's private secretary, began a work with such letters as he could collect.

What precisely were the adventures of these papers after they had served the uses of the biographers can never be known. We do know, however, that within a few years public libraries have come into possession of two lots of this material. While writing his "History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850," it came to

suggestive in landscape, Böcklin also added a touch of heroic breadth to the treatment of wood, sky, and meadow, as witness the canvases of not a few of the outdoor painters of the day. There are, of course, certain individuals even in the south who have not been inundated by this torrent of color and imagination. The mundane Keller, the neurasthenic Habermann, and the strong animalier, Heinrich Zügel, have gone their way undisturbed, yet it is impossible to overestimate the influence of the sovereign symbolist who finds his echo not alone in painting but in the music of Wagner, the philosophy of Nietzsche, and the fairy dramas of Gerhardt Hauptmann.

With the passing, within a few years, of both Menzel and Böcklin, the two master currents of modern Teutonic art arrived at their flood. The forces of realism and idealism, so constantly at odds in the history of German thought and German life, seem at present to have declared a partial truce. Spent by the fury of the struggle, and somewhat perplexed by the spoils of war, both sides are momentarily marking time or deliberately seeking novelty and

distraction. The crass objectivity of the north has found its antidote in the luxuriant creative fertility of the south. The asperities of naturalism have, moreover, been modified by the coming of impressionism which has taught the salutary lesson that truth is, after all, individual and subjective. With such an artistic inheritance as Germany to-day possesses, it is inevitable that the fantasist should seek the support of fact and the positivist should not remain deaf to the myriad voices of the spirit world. It is probable that the art of the future will seek to offer a synthesis of the two elements which, until now, have stood in direct opposition to one another. Already there are signs of a convergence, for in the stylistic yet accurate and faithful landscapes of such a nature poet as the late Walter Leistikow appear to reside the germs of subsequent development along these lines. In his glimpses of Grunewald forest, glade, and tarn he has manifestly striven for a fitting compromise between actuality and æsthetic convention—between outward beauty and that beauty which lies so mysteriously imbedded in the consciousness of mankind.



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"A Woodland Tarn," by Walter Leistikow.

Mr. Rhodes's knowledge that there were many Chase letters in the vaults of a safe-deposit company in Washington. As they had long lain there unclaimed, they were offered to him if he would pay the accumulated storage charges of twenty years. He advanced the sum, which was later returned to him when the papers were sold to the Library of Congress. There they now repose—supplemented by a large collection found in the possession of the family of a man, who had once been a political agent for Chase, by Albert Bushnell Hart when he was preparing his biography for the American Statesman Series. These papers at Washington seem to be those which were worked over by Judge Warden.

Another collection was sold by Mr. Schuckers to Brinton Cox, of Philadelphia, and at the latter's death it found its way to the Library of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. It is from these letters and diaries that the accompanying extracts are gleaned.

Of much interest is Mr. Chase's account of the means that were taken in September, 1863, to transport a large body of troops from Virginia to Tennessee in order to reinforce Rosecrans. Mr. Chase's confidence in this commander, despite his long inaction after the battle of Murfreesboro, was as great as in Hooker on the eastern field of war. Nevertheless his spirit chafed as the weeks passed and no effectual steps were taken "to drive the rebels from east Tennessee," while Bragg, who confronted the Union troops, was being constantly strengthened by the Confederate Government.

Rosecrans in motion at last, by clever strategical movements had compelled his opponent to vacate Chattanooga, although the victory soon proved to be rather barren. The Confederate lines were drawn closely around him; and after the battle of Chickamauga he was virtually a besieged man. So serious was the situation accounted to be that on the night of September 23d there was a hurried conference in Washington, of which Mr. Chase tells in his diaries as of that date, though the insertion was manifestly made at his leisure some time afterward:

"I shall not soon forget the events of the night of this day. Our news from

Chattanooga was more hopeful, but it was evident that Rosecrans's army was in great peril. Meade was in the neighborhood of Manassas, following Lee, and, it was hoped, about to win a decisive victory over him. But he was cautious and it was uncertain if he would strike at all. I went home from the Department thinking over the state of things with great anxiety. It was about midnight, and I had just retired when the door-bell rang and the message was brought to me, 'The Secretary of War desires that you will come to the Department immediately and has sent a carriage for you.'

"What can be the matter?" I said to myself as I hastily rose and dressed. 'Has the enemy attacked Rosecrans? Has he captured him and his army? Has he driven our men across the Tennessee?'

"When I reached the War Department I found Mr. Stanton there, silent and stern.

"Is there any bad news?" I asked.

"None," was the brief reply. General Halleck was present and the President either was there already or soon came in; Mr. Seward also came.

"At length when we five were assembled Mr. Stanton began:

"I have invited this meeting because I am thoroughly convinced that something must be done, and done immediately, to insure the safety of the army under Rosecrans, and wish to have it considered and decided whether anything, and if anything, what shall be done.'

"Then turning to General Halleck he asked:

"What forces can Burnside send to Rosecrans at Chattanooga?"

"General Halleck replied, '20,000 men.'

"Stanton—'How soon?'

"Halleck—'In ten days, if not interrupted.'

"President—'Before ten days Burnside can put in enough to hold the place.'

"Halleck—'He can bring up 12,000 perhaps in eight days.'

"President—'When Burnside's men begin to arrive the place will be safe; but the pinch is now.'

"Stanton—'If the enemy presses or attacks Burnside, what then?'

"Halleck—'Burnside must take his measures accordingly—fight or act defensively.'

"Stanton—'If enemy has enough to detach a force against Burnside and also attack Rosecrans?'"

"Halleck—'Rosecrans must be relieved otherwise.'"

"Stanton—'When can Sherman relieve him?'"

"Halleck—'In about ten days, if already marched from Vicksburg. If not marched should come up the river and overland from Memphis. He has 20,000 or 25,000 men. Every available man is ordered forward and boats have gone down the river from Cairo to bring them up.'"

"Stanton—'Then your estimate of what can be done by Sherman is only conjectural?'"

"Halleck—'Of course it is impossible to speak definitely in such a matter.'"

"Stanton—'Can men be had from any other quarter?'"

"Halleck—'Perhaps a few from Kentucky—don't know how many. All are already ordered to Rosecrans.'"

"Stanton—'Mr. President, I think it perfectly clear from what has been said that no certain or even probable relief will reach Rosecrans from any quarter that has been named. I do not believe a man will get to him from Burnside or Sherman in time to be of any use in the emergency which is upon us. The Army of the Potomac is doing nothing important, nor is it likely to be more actively employed. I propose, therefore, to send 20,000 men from the Army of the Potomac to Chattanooga under the command of General Hooker.'"

"This proposition was objected to quite strongly by General Halleck and the President. Both expressed the belief that the troops could not be got through to Chattanooga, or near enough to be of essential service to the army of Rosecrans as soon as troops could be furnished from Burnside's or Sherman's command, and both were unwilling to withdraw troops from Meade."

"Mr. Stanton said that he had fully considered the question of practicability and should not have submitted his proposition had he not fully satisfied himself on that head by conference with the ablest railroad men of the country. General Halleck had given no definite assurance as to the time in which relief could be given by Sherman or Burnside. His near-

est approach to definiteness was eight days by Burnside if uninterrupted by the enemy. Was not the enemy sure to interrupt? And was it not well known that activity by Burnside would involve the abandonment of east Tennessee to which Burnside was strongly opposed and therefore extremely unwilling to move? Whereas if it should be determined to send men from the Army of the Potomac the order for the two corps could be given in the morning—by night the column would be entering Washington, the troops could be put in cars at once and in five days the advance might be entering Nashville."

"'Why,' said the President, 'You can't get one corps into Washington in the time you fix for reaching Nashville,' and he illustrated his idea of the impossibility by some story which I have forgotten."

"Stanton was greatly annoyed and made some remark to the effect that the danger was too imminent and the occasion too serious for jokes; he added that as he saw himself overruled he would give up the point; and invited us all into the adjoining room where he had caused a light collation to be prepared."

"I then remarked that I hoped the proposition would not be abandoned; that it seemed to me exceedingly important and that we could resume its consideration with advantage after a little refreshment. I added a very brief résumé of Mr. Stanton's arguments already urged, expressed my entire confidence in his ability to do what he proposed, and declared it to be my deliberate judgment that to refuse to adopt it was to refuse to adopt the only plan by which the army of Rosecrans would with any certainty be saved. We then went to the collation. On returning to the Secretary's room, Mr. Seward took up the subject and supported Mr. Stanton's proposition with excellent arguments."

"The scale was now turned. Every objection was abandoned except that of weakening Meade, and finally the President said that he would telegraph Meade in the morning, and, if he did not propose an immediate movement, the order for the two corps to move should be given at once to General Halleck. It was near morning when we went home. Two or three hours later the telegram was sent, the answer received, the order for the movement given."

"The result is well known. The advance of Hooker's command reached Nashville in a week, frustrated the attempt to break up Rosecrans's communications and his army was saved; and Chattanooga was saved and the future was saved. Neither Sherman's column, nor Burnside's, came up in time to be of any use in this special work. Burnside's did not come up at all. Sherman's came, but came after the peril was past, though in time for the glorious achievement which soon afterward electrified the country. The country does not know how much it owes Edwin M. Stanton for that night's work."*

The issue of this bold movement was in doubt for many days and it needed the brilliant victories on Lookout Mountain and at Missionary Ridge to mollify the critics of the government, of whom Mr. Chase always reserved to himself the right to be one of the most active, notwithstanding his responsible relations to it. On September 30 he wrote to his daughter Kate:

"... The great expedition to reinforce Rosecrans is going on admirably. If no hitch occurs the advance from the Army of the Potomac will begin to arrive at Chattanooga, or within supporting distance, within the next few days.

"How much would have been gained had Rosecrans attacked when Bragg was weak?"

To John D. Jones on the same day Chase wrote:

"... My soul is filled with anguish by the belief that much of the calamity we suffer is due to irresolution and procrastination, and, I fear sometimes also, to the indifference of those who are charged with the conduct of the war. Why did not Rosecrans attack Bragg when he was weak? Why, when the golden moments were suffered to slip by unused, why did not General Halleck promptly reinforce Rosecrans to the full extent of the reinforcements he knew were going to Bragg? Why did not the President *re-quire* him to do so? These are questions which history will put again with even

greater emphasis. How will history answer them?"

That President Lincoln and Secretary Stanton could themselves manage the war with success was doubted by very many people. Mr. Chase in particular felt his individual responsibility keenly, and he all the while wrote letters to military leaders in the field, as well as to civil officials and citizens, offering his counsel and criticism, to which they as frankly replied.

Montgomery Blair once told Samuel J. Tilden that Chase was the "only human being" whom Lincoln "actually hated." (Letters and Literary Memorials of Samuel J. Tilden, p. 233.) A statement of this kind from so unfriendly a source may be taken with caution, but that the great President and his Secretary of the Treasury were not congenial spirits is a well-known fact. It finds fresh corroboration in these papers. It irked Mr. Chase, who always himself desired to be President, to occupy any subordinate place. On July 15, 1862, he wrote to James A. Hamilton: "Your excellent note is just received. I will send it to the President and shall be glad if he will read and heed it.

"I have seen little of him for some time past. When he thinks fit to ask my counsel or to impart his own I attend his summons.

"Otherwise I confine myself to my special work. What I think ought to be done is so generally left undone—what I think ought not to be done so generally done, that I am led to doubt greatly the value of my views on any subject."

Again in September, 1862, in the course of a letter to Zachariah Chandler, Senator from Michigan, Mr. Chase wrote:

"I, though charged with the responsibility of providing for the enormous expenditures entailed upon the country, have no control over—no voice even in deciding on—the measures by which the necessity for them is created. In fact I know almost as little of what is being done as any outside. Neither credit nor responsibility for what is decided outside of the Treasury Department belongs to me. The only responsibility really mine is that of consenting to remain in a position where I am necessarily supposed to have some voice in public affairs, and especially in the

* Chase to the end warmly admired Stanton, who alone of all his old associates in the Cabinet called upon him before his departure from Washington, after his resignation from the Treasury Department in the summer of 1864. In a letter to Robert Dale Owen on September 6, 1863, Chase wrote: "Some progress has been made for which we are in great measure indebted to Mr. Stanton, to whom how much the country owes will never be known."

measures which belong to the prosecution of the war in which we are involved; when in reality I have none at all which may not be overborne by factitious military clamor or insidious outside pressure.

"Don't misunderstand me as making any personal complaint of the President. I do not. In every matter connected with my Department he allows me to take whatever course I think best, always giving me a cordial support, and manifesting in me all the confidence I can possibly claim.

"But I do not think it enough that the Heads of Departments be supported in their special administrations. The affairs of each are so intimately connected with the general action of the government that it has always been thought the duty of the President to convene them regularly for consultation, and to take their judgments in all important matters, and in general—though this is by no means obligatory—to act in accordance with the well-considered conclusions of the majority. There is on the contrary at the present time no cabinet except in name. The Heads of Departments come together now and then, nominally twice a week; but no reports are made, no regular discussions held, no ascertained conclusions reached. Sometimes weeks pass by and no full meeting is held. One can get some information about military matters if he will make due enquiry at the War Department, or about naval matters at the Naval Department; but full systematic accounts of the progress of the struggle; the purposes entertained; the means and modes of action by or against us are neither made, nor given, nor required.

"Let us rejoice that Providence rules and let us hope that He means to save though as by fire."

These views were elaborated by Mr. Chase in correspondence with his friend Bishop C. P. McIlvaine of Ohio, on January 25, 1863:

"Your letters should have been answered at once, but I need not apologize to you for delay; for *you* know my hindrances. Even since writing this initial sentence I have been interrupted half a dozen times by half a dozen callers on various business.

"It is impossible for me to express my anxiety concerning the state of the country; but my ignorance of the real condition,

except in so far as my own department is concerned, is almost as great as my anxiety. Our administration under the President's system, if system it be, is Departmental. There are some important matters which the President reserves substantially to himself—for example those relating to slavery for the most part. He also not unfrequently determines important and sometimes unimportant questions concerning the war; and decides on many appointments. Whatever he there does he does generally, though not always, without consultation, so far as I am advised. If there is consultation, except in a few cases, I do not know it. With these reservations, I repeat, the administration is Departmental; that is to say I administer the Treasury, Mr. Blair the Post Office, Mr. Welles the Navy, and so on. The President sustains me kindly and cordially when I ask him; but in general does not interfere at all, or even care to be informed as to the line of action I adopt. What is true of the President is true of other Heads of Departments, as a general statement. And what is true of my Department is true of all, except that the President naturally takes most interest in the progress of the war, and of course in the action of the War Department, and also, though not so marked, in that of the Navy Department. The Heads of Departments are not expected to exert much, if any, influence on the action of any other Department than their own: of course they do not expect to be consulted except very rarely in relation to any important matter involved in such action. Not being consulted they are not informed. I can get more or less information touching the war by going to the War and Navy Departments and making particular enquiries. I receive what it is thought fit to impart and am left in ignorance of what it is thought fit to withhold. How much is imparted, how much withheld, I can only judge by developments. Such information under such circumstances is not pleasant nor very profitable. So I content myself generally with what I learn from the public prints.

"I see it for example announced this morning that General Burnside is relieved from command and General Hooker appointed in his stead. I had heard nothing from anybody in the Administration indicating that such event was likely to take

place, and of course I can give *you* no information. I try to administer my Department as well as I can, but feel that I am of little use outside of it, and that to be considered as a responsible member of an administration is as unjust as it is natural [?]. If my service here is useful I shall thank God, who enables me to be useful: but it is far from agreeable or in my judgment creditable to be the head of a Department under existing circumstances.

"My notion of an administration is a President supreme under the Constitution and Laws; Heads of Departments capable and faithful in their several administrations and fit to be counsellors of the Chief Magistrate; measures gravely and fully considered by all and determined on after such consideration by the Head and then vigorously executed by concert of all. Light and heat focalized."

In reply to a letter of E. D. Mansfield, Mr. Chase wrote on October 27, 1863:

". . . And why do you talk about a Cabinet? Blair is Postmaster-General, but not a member of the Cabinet, for there is no Cabinet to be a member of. You have been in Washington and know that each Head of a Department is expected to 'run his own machine,' as Mr. Lincoln expresses it. And each runs his machine without any help of the others pretty much as he pleases; and no one knows except as a matter of news what either of the others is doing."

In a letter to Horace Greeley about the same time (October 9) Chase wrote:

"There is no such thing in Washington as an administration in the accepted sense of that word. There is a Heptarchy or seven administrations—State, Treasury, War, Navy, Interior, Post Office, Law. All except the third are left almost absolutely to their several Heads, each of whom is expected to 'run his machine' as well as he can. The war comes under a divided jurisdiction. The President, Mr. Stanton and General Halleck each take part in the conduct of military operations, as well as in the organization and administration of the army. Nobody else has more than an incidental and casual influence."

"How idle it seems for me to speculate on military affairs," Mr. Chase concluded

a letter to David Dudley Field on June 30, 1863. "The President consults only Stanton and Halleck in the management of the war. I look on from the outside and as well as I can furnish the means. In my own Department I live by work—in the others by faith only. But I exercise faith, not forgetting hope and charity."

After Lee was allowed to recross the Potomac on the retreat from the battlefield of Gettysburg, Mr. Chase, on July 15, 1863, wrote to Senator William Sprague of Rhode Island, now affianced to his daughter Kate:

"We were all terribly disappointed by the news yesterday that Lee had escaped with the whole remainder of his army and all his artillery and baggage. The President came into my room and told me of it, about two yesterday afternoon. He was more grieved and indignant than I have ever seen him. Ever since the battle of Gettysburg he had been urging on Halleck the importance of promptitude and vigilance, and of activity. His sole fear has been lest Lee's army should get away. He was annoyed by the tone of Meade's address to his troops, which insisted [?] that the main object conceived by him was the repulse of the enemy's invasion. He saw the same idea in Meade's despatches and did all he could (except take the responsibility) to make him understand that it was the rout of Lee's army, not its mere expulsion from Pennsylvania, which was desired. And now his worst fears were realized. Lee's army gone and no blow struck. I reminded him that the last time he came to my room it was very much in the same frame of mind, when he had just received despatches from Hurlbut* that Grant had been defeated and his army captured at Jackson; and that I then told him that daylight always came before darkness, and that all we had to do was to gather new forces and persevere. He thought the cases not exactly similar and I agreed, but insisted that the difference was on our side, for had Grant been in fact defeated the case would have been much worse with us than now.

"Since this interview with the President I have learned that Meade called a council

*Major-General Stephen A. Hurlbut. Manifestly one of many false reports inevitable in such a time of civil disturbance.

of his corps commanders on Saturday or Sunday evening—that Slocum, Sedgwick, French and one or two more opposed a battle, while Howard, Wadsworth and Pleasanton decidedly favored it—that the debate was warm and earnest—that Meade's judgment was with the minority, but his desire with the majority—that the army consequently lay idle all day Sunday when Lee was crossing the river some six or eight miles off, Meade knowing nothing of it—and that Monday morning they found all gone and clear across.

"Meade's laurels are badly stained;

for my part I yet put most faith in Hooker."

Mr. Chase's disappointment was as great as Lincoln's and he expressed it in letters to his friends in vivid words. He wrote to George Wilkes on July 23d:

"In your general views as to the campaign which resulted in the passage—so glorious to us—of the Potomac by Lee's army I quite concur. When he advanced into Maryland I wrote to several, and said to more, 'God has delivered him into our hands.' And so he had; but Man did not take the gift."

THE MAN WHO CAME*

By Edwin Arlington Robinson

A FLYING word from here and there
Had sown the name at which we sneered,
But soon the name was everywhere,
To be reviled and then revered:
A presence to be loved and feared,
We cannot hide it, or deny
That we, the gentlemen who jeered,
May be forgotten by and by.

He came when days were perilous
And hearts of men were sore beguiled;
And having made his note of us,
He pondered and was reconciled.
Was ever master yet so mild
As he, and so untamable?
We doubted, even when he smiled,
Not knowing what he knew so well.

He knew that undeceiving fate
Would shame us whom he served unsought;
He knew that he must wince and wait—
The jest of those for whom he fought;
He knew devoutly what he thought
Of us and of our ridicule;
He knew that we must all be taught
Like little children in a school.

* Supposed to have been written not long after the Civil War.